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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is concerned that Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev will sign into law a series of restrictive amendments negatively affecting religious freedom. Amendments to the religion law, as well as the criminal and administrative offenses codes, were passed by Azerbaijan's parliament in speed and secrecy on May 8. Reportedly, they contain numerous provisions that may violate Azerbaijan's international legal commitments on freedom of religion or belief. The parliament was scheduled to send these amendments to the president by May 18. Upon receipt, the president has 56 days to consider signing them into law, according to the non-governmental organization Forum 18. If signed, these vaguely-worded provisions will result in increased government control over legitimate religious activities in Azerbaijan.

The areas of concern include:

- the basis for possible bans on religious organizations;
- a likely prohibition on conscientious objection to military service;
- denial of legal status to unregistered religious organizations as well as the requirement that registered religious communities re-register;
- the imposition of numerous vague registration requirements, including doctrinal and other tests left to the discretion of state officials;
- religious activity – and even the sale of religious literature – restricted to officially approved premises; and
- religious communities required to receive state permission in order to engage in the religious education of children or adults.

Moreover, the country's criminal and administrative codes are to be amended so as to increase penalties for those whom the courts have found guilty of alleged violations of the religion law.

"If enacted, the future for freedom of religion or belief in Azerbaijan looks bleak," said Michael Cromartie, Vice Chair of USCIRF, an independent U.S. government commission that monitors religious freedom worldwide. "The passage of these restrictive amendments could have a severe impact on religious freedom in Azerbaijan, as it would potentially criminalize internationally protected religious activity. As he considers whether to sign these amendments into law, President Aliyev should consider the damage to Azerbaijan's international reputation of religious tolerance and honor the country's international commitments to respect freedom of religion or belief."

Mr. Cromartie noted that President Aliyev's decision on whether to give these numerous restrictive amendments the force of law will not pass unnoticed. He called on the Obama administration to raise these issues.

Azerbaijan is a signatory of the U.N. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 18 of the ICCPR provides for religious freedom. In addition, Azerbaijan is a member of the Council of Europe as well as the 56-state Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) which has additional religious freedom commitments. In addition, the Commission is concerned about some other policies of the government of

Azerbaijan.

Islam, Russian Orthodoxy, and Judaism are officially viewed as “traditional” by the government and their official organizations reportedly receive preferential treatment. These religions, particularly Islam, nevertheless, are subject to government control and all religious literature is subject to state censorship. Under the current religion law, all Muslim communities are required to belong to the state-linked Caucasus Muslim Board. Several Muslim leaders, including Imam Kazim Aliev and Ilgar Ibrahimoglu Allahverdiev, have been subject to official harassment or court hearings without due process.

Members of various minority religious communities also have faced obstacles in recent years. Two Baptist pastors, Zaur Balaev and Hamid Shabanov, have been imprisoned reportedly on false charges; few Baptist churches have been registered in Azerbaijan. Georgian Orthodox believers in north-west Azerbaijan also face major restrictions at the hands of local authorities. Jehovah’s Witnesses have been subjected to police raids and other forms of harassment in various parts of the country.

USCIRF is a bipartisan Federal Commission, whose Commissioners are appointed by the President of the United States and the Senate and House of Representatives.

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